

Portrait of a Centenarian Pure Land Master



Master Hai Xian painted by Sunyata on my suggestion (https://www.instagram.com/sunyata_art/)

By Brian Bye Sheng Chung (2024)

Every drop of detail in the Infinite Life Sutra can be found displayed in his daily conduct. He is the Infinite Life Sutra and the Sutra is him. His life of cultivation will serve as a beacon of light for thousands of years to come.

-Ven. Master Chin Kung on Ven. Master Hai Xian

信願行 (FAITH VOWS PRACTICE)

If one wishes to summarize the Buddha's advice in the Infinite Life Sutra (link at bottom), the above three words would suffice. Anyone who wishes to take advantage of Amita Buddha's Forty Eight Vows must have faith in Pure Land, resolutely seek Pure Land wholeheartedly, and be willing to recite Amita Buddha's name single-mindedly. Furthermore, in the chapter where the Buddha outlined the three grades of successful aspirants, all three demonstrated these three tenets. However, in Chapter 41, all three types of persons who failed to leave the Samsara had either insufficient faith, non-existent vows or a lack of willingness to practice. Hence, doubt, inconsistent effort or wavering resolve for Pure Land rebirth will handicap our potential. Therefore, we are now going to study the life story of someone who has succeeded by practicing this Sutra.

Venerable Master Hai Xian (海賢老和尚) attained Pure Land rebirth 11 years ago at the venerable age of 112. In fact, he was still plowing the temple fields on the eve of his Pure Land rebirth despite his advanced age. Amazingly, he managed to successfully practice mindfulness of Amitabha his entire life, even persevering through the chaos of the Chinese Civil War, WWII, Cultural Revolution, various other hardships such as his illiteracy, misfortune and poverty. He was single-minded in his practice. His unwavering faith, yearning for Pure Land, honest and diligent practice ensured that he was able to attain single-mindedness within three years of his ordination. Thus, his life story is a living example of the Infinite Life Sutra. He is a Bodhisattva of Pure Land and belongs to the highest grade of aspirants.

Master Hai Xian attained Pure Land rebirth during the wee hours of January 17th 2013, a time and date he foreknew. Those who have recited the name of Amita Buddha to the level of single-mindedness meet Amita Buddha prior to their Pure Land rebirth, for the Buddha naturally appears before those who are no longer shrouded by karmic obstacles. Since Venerable Hai Xian's mindfulness had by then far surpassed that level, he already met Amita Buddha numerous times prior. However, he was requested to remain in this world in each of those earlier encounters so that his exemplary cultivation and presence may remain to inspire confidence, and serve as a beacon of light for cultivators to emulate. Furthermore, he has also been nominated to succeed the Great Master Yin Guang as the 14th Patriarch of the Pure Land School by Venerable Master Chin Kung. Therefore, all cultivators of Pure Land Buddhism should strive to emulate the late Master's exemplary faith and diligence in reciting Amita Buddha's name.

Childhood and Early Life:

Venerable Master Hai Xian (1901–2013) was born in Henan province on August 19th 1901 to a devout Buddhist family. His birth name was Wen Chuan Xian (文川賢) and he had five siblings. The family was poor and young Chuan Xian's father often had to travel to neighbouring villages to ask for alms. When Chuan Xian was ten years old, his father was beaten to death by bandits while trying to put out a raging fire set by his murderers (they had torched an entire village while plundering it). The returning villagers sent his body home to be buried with honors.

When Chuan Xian reached adolescence, he experienced and observed several events which strengthened his faith in Buddhism. For instance, in one case, a relative of his who delighted in severely verbally and physically abusing another family member eventually gave birth successively to four children who all died young. Furthermore, she became mentally unstable and bit her own tongue out. Finally, she died in agony shortly after giving birth to a daughter. She was only thirty two years old at the time of death. It was eventually understood that her short life and misfortunes were due to the evil karma created by her malicious speech and violent behaviour.

When Chuan Xian reached the age of 18, he developed carbuncles (large boils) on his leg. It was so severe that the leg became gangrenous and his life was threatened. His mother consulted numerous doctors and tried countless treatments— all to no avail. Finally, Chuan Xian realized that this illness was the result of past evil karma and refused further treatment. He then sincerely recited the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva. Miraculously, the leg healed completely by the end of the month.

These experiences and events prompted him to seriously consider the pain and suffering of the wheel of rebirth. Just like Dharmakara in Chapter 4 of the Infinite Life Sutra, Chuan Xian now understood the following realisation from the Eight Discernments of Eminent Men Sutra:

The Eighth Discernment is this: The Samsara is a raging inferno plagued by endless afflictions. Hence, resolve upon the Mahayana aspiration to liberate all beings. Vow to bear the unbearable for the sake of helping sentient beings achieve ultimate bliss.

Moreover, his faith in the Buddha-dharma and the laws of karma were now strong and resolute.

Life as a Monk:

When Chuan Xian turned twenty years of age, he decided to leave the home life and become a monk. Thus, he bid his mother farewell and was ordained in 1920 by the eminent Dharma Master Chwan Jie (傳戒法師). Henceforth, he was known as Venerable Hai Xian. Master Chwan Jie did not teach him to practice Zen or to study and speak the Dharma. He simply taught Venerable Hai Xian to single-mindedly recite the name of Amitabha. Venerable Hai Xian, being as faithful as Patriarch Huineng (who was illiterate like him), diligently cultivated as instructed. What many do not know is that the name of Amita Buddha represents our Buddha-nature. When Patriarch Huineng said that the Buddha-nature is omniscient and self sufficient, he is saying that when a person's heart is the same as Amita Buddha, they have attained the mind seal of the Buddha. Hence, such a person no longer has outflows and is pure.

In fact, all the great sutras such as the Lotus Sutra and Shurangama Sutra are simply an expansion of the name of Amita Buddha. They were spoken to serve as an indirect way for people who still have doubt to gradually believe in the unsurpassed perfection of reciting Amita Buddha's name. This is why the Shurangama Sutra ends by mentioning that anyone who merely thinks about teaching the Shurangama Sutra to someone can have all their

heavy offenses eradicated and be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. The name of Amita Buddha represents the infinite merit and wisdom of all the Buddhas.

Hence, Master Chwan Jie recognized Venerable Hai Xian's faith, humility and determination, and thus passed to him the highest Dharma. Since Master Hai Xian's heart was always mindful of Amita Buddha, his conduct naturally conformed with that of a Buddha. For instance, he cultivated each the Six Paramitas perfectly without exception. As his heart reflected Amita Buddha, he was naturally not subject to the urges and defilements that cause regular people to turn their backs on the five precepts and ten virtues. His heart was pure and free from the six kinds of dust.

In Upasaka Huang Nien Tsu's commentary on the Infinite Life Sutra, it is mentioned that there are the following different fields of merit:

The field of gratitude (i.e. one's parents and teachers).

The triple jewel field (i.e. Buddha-dharma).

The field of mercy (i.e. poor, sick and needy, disaster victims, or suffering animals....)

Thus, in terms of generosity, he diligently planted in all fields of merit. For instance, when the Red Guards came to vandalize the Stupa of his mentor, Master Hai Xian managed to retrieve beforehand the ashes of his mentor and hid them in a secret compartment. When the Communist government forbade him from reciting and forced him to serve as a superintendent for a local farming team, he continued to be mindful of Amita Buddha in his heart and prostrated to the Buddha at night. If there was meat in the communal pot, he would eat only the vegetables around it. As soon as the Cultural Revolution ended, he immediately returned to the temple and built a new Stupa for his mentor. He also invited his aged mother into the small temple where he resided and cared for her until she attained Pure Land rebirth.

Furthermore, throughout his life, he never ceased to be assiduous with his duties. Being a farmer by former profession, he diligently cultivated many wild-lands into tillable farmland. With the crops he grew by himself, he fed his aged fellow cultivators and the poor, old and needy. In fact, he once donated about half a ton of crops that he personally grew to relieve those affected by the 1989 floods.

Moreover, he regularly liberated life and helped repair bridges. He also led the building of new temples. Even when he spotted someone stealing some of the corn he grew, he did not become hostile but generously gifted the thief the cream of the crop. Such conduct reflects the compassionate behaviour of Bodhisattvas as described in the Sutra of the Eight Discernments of Eminent Men:

The Sixth Discernment is this: Poverty and deprivation leads to countless grievances and unrest. When Bodhisattvas practice almsgiving, they consider foes to be equal to their dearest kinsmen. They neither harbor grudges nor ostracize criminals.

As the name of Amita Buddha is self sufficient and the fount of all virtues, one whose heart is mindful of Amitabha will naturally display virtue, wisdom and equanimity at all times. This is why Venerable Hai Xian did not react with anger even when an arrogant utilities bill collector slapped him after he pointed out that the bill was erroneously high, and simply kindly paid the collector what he wanted. In Chapter 33 of the Infinite Life Sutra, the Buddha mentioned:

“When interacting with others, we must know that even a small disagreement now may escalate into a mass of hostility in the lives to come. Thus, we must be careful. Those who antagonize and humiliate others will eventually be reborn together with their victims and suffer their vengeance.”

Likewise, the Venerable Master Chin Kung often stresses that competition leads to quarrels which later grow into wars. This is why forbearance is so important in Buddhism. However, it is very hard to exercise patience while still afflicted by passions. Hence, the only solution is to recite the name of Amita Buddha single-mindedly. Only with this samadhi can we avoid piling up karmic enemies. Furthermore, the merits created would be so great that all existing karmic enemies will quickly become friends. As our creditors, they naturally benefit from the blessings we create.

In all of his 112 years of life, Venerable Hai Xian lived simply. He sewed his own clothes and grew his own food. If he received offerings, he would use it to print sutras and liberate life. On his birthday the year before his Pure Land rebirth, a group of householders prepared a sumptuous meal as a birthday gift. For the first time in his life, Venerable Hai Xian did not smile and declined to eat any of it except for a few sprouts. The householders soon realized that he was teaching them by example. As the Buddha’s last advice to the Sangha before his parinirvana was that one should regard the precepts as one’s teacher and hardship as nourishment, such a display of austerity reflected this key advice.

In Chapter 34 of the Infinite Life Sutra, it is mentioned that birth, death, sickness and old age are all agonizing pains. Furthermore, the Buddha also stressed that only Pure Land rebirth can free us from them. Venerable Hai Xian’s life proves this to us. Ever since he was able to single-mindedly recite Amita Buddha’s name, he became free of those agonizing pains forever. He will never have to undergo birth again as those who are reborn in Pure Land manifest by transformation. Moreover, sickness and old age cannot bother him as his mindfulness of Amitabha allowed him to dwell in the bliss of samadhi. **In fact, he was perfectly healthy up until his Pure Land rebirth, even climbing trees and tilling the land everyday despite being well over 100 years old.**

Rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss

Prior to his Pure Land rebirth, Amita Buddha appeared before him and informed him that he will be reborn in Pure Land when he receives a Dharma book titled “If Buddhism is to Prosper ; Practitioners Must Praise Each other” (若要佛法興唯有僧 贊僧).

On January 13th 2013, a visiting guest gifted the book to Venerable Hai Xian. He immediately donned his best robes and requested that a picture be taken of him with the book (see picture below). This gesture — he had never before asked to be photographed —



was to serve as an endorsement for the book, which decisively neutralized recent libel against Upasaka Xia's Compilation of the Infinite Life Sutra. Hence, we too should take the book's main advice and refrain from criticizing others. We should praise all practitioners of all branches of Buddhism and promote interfaith harmony.

In the three following days, Venerable Hai Xian visited a number of his old friends and acquaintances. Even on the afternoon of the third day, he was still working in the temple fields. When one concerned junior monk asked him to retire, he cryptically responded, “I’m almost finished, when I am, I’ll be done for good.” That night, Venerable Hai Xian loudly recited the name of Amita Buddha continuously. By morning, he was discovered to have already entered the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Just like the recorded signs of Pure Land rebirth in the various scriptures — rigor mortis did not set in and his body remained soft, flexible and fresh. Incidentally, like Bodhidharma, Venerable Hai Xian’s mother’s coffin was empty except for a shoe when it was exhumed for a more proper reburial.

Hence, knowing this, we should have absolute faith in our ability to attain Pure Land rebirth. Everything that Venerable Master Hai Xian achieved, he did it for us. He has unequivocally shown us the Buddha’s words are true. He could have left for Pure Land when he was in his 20s, but he stayed to show us the way. Therefore, we must repay such kindness by heeding the important lessons he has taught us by example.

Lastly, during Venerable Hai Xian’s funeral ceremony, one attending Dharma Master **mentioned Venerable Hai Xian’s encounter with a wolf in his eulogy.** One day when Venerable Hai Xian was journeying, a wolf came up to him and proceeded to gently drag him by his robes. He initially thought that this was his moment of death and thus diligently recited the Buddha’s name. However, it soon became apparent that the wolf simply wished to request his help. The wolf led Venerable Hai Xian back to its den where a female wolf was on the verge of death due to complications of labor. Venerable Hai Xian speedily recited the name of Amita Buddha to the female wolf. The merit from his mindfulness instantly saved the life of the female wolf, allowing it to safely give birth to a litter of cubs. The next day, the wolf appeared again and offered honeycombs in gratitude to Venerable Hai Xian. Thus, if even a wolf can recognize virtue and repay kindness, how can we (as humans) neglect to repay the kindness of Venerable Master Hai Xian and heed his example? Buddhism is about turning the great Dharma Wheel. Hence, we must strive to cultivate in accordance with Venerable Hai Xian’s teachings. We should first recite to single-mindedness ourselves and then turn to helping others. We repay the kindness of Master Hai Xian by becoming Sages ourselves. We turn the great Dharma Wheel by becoming an example for other people to emulate.

Important Lessons

The most important lesson that Venerable Hai Xian’s life teaches us is the importance of faithfully and single-mindedly reciting Amita Buddha’s name. As mentioned before, the Buddha-nature is omniscient and self sufficient, and Amita Buddha is our Buddha-nature. This means that this Buddha name represents every Dharma and the Threefold Training all in one. Thus, by reciting Amita Buddha’s name to the level of single-mindedness, we are recovering the infinite stock of merit, utmost virtue and unsurpassed wisdom that our Buddha-nature contains. We can only meet Amita Buddha when our heart finally matches the Buddha’s and yearns for Pure Land rebirth. The Buddha is absolutely compassionate and will certainly respond if we truly seek him.

“Of all good deeds, which is the foremost? The answer is that rectifying one’s heart and mind is the greatest good. Your body can commit no evil if your heart is pure. Do this and you will be in accordance with all that which is good and virtuous.”

- Chapter 36, Infinite Life Sutra

In short, the meaning of this important passage is that the greatest good is to recite Namó Amita Buddha single-mindedly.

The biggest mistakes cultivators make nowadays is to seek the external instead of from within. We do this and do that — and try our faith in a merry go round of different practices. We do this for a little while and that for a little while. Then we complain that the Buddha does not respond. The truth is that the fault lies with ourselves. We were not focused and sincere, our senses still connected with the six kinds of dust. Hence, we thought we are seeking the Buddha and Pure Land, but our scattered efforts and thoughts were simply asking for the six kinds of dust.

However, if we achieve single-minded concentration in Amita Buddha, we become omniscient and self sufficient, no longer bothered by attachments and aversions. With such Non-abidance, we will effortlessly display all of the Six Paramitas and Four Immeasurables without fail. This is because all virtues and good works naturally spring from one who has returned to the Buddha-nature.

This is the point that Venerable Hai Xian is trying to teach us. He did the humanly impossible and bore unbearable burdens during his 112 years of life. However, he did not suffer even a hair’s breadth worth of stress. This is because he found the inner bliss of the Buddha-nature while we seek false bliss and distractions from the outside. He never planned or calculated any of his own actions since he had already transcended intent. He did so by reciting Amita Buddha’s name to the levels of single-mindedness and profound concentration. By being focused wholeheartedly on Pure Land rebirth, and resisting all scattered thoughts, doubts and the temptations of the six kinds of dust during his first few years as a monk, he achieved Sagehood. Thus, everything he achieved afterwards simply flowed from his Buddha-nature.

Thus, the main lesson here is that we need to focus. As mentioned before, sincerely reciting the name of Amita Buddha represents cultivating Sila, Samadhi and Prajna all at once. Thus, we should strive to recite it always. We must not be distracted by mundane urges and doubts. Furthermore, all our other good deeds or practices should be done without attachment— that is immediately dedicated towards Pure Land rebirth and forgotten. We should just diligently recite towards single-mindedness, seeking only Pure Land rebirth. Unwavering faith and concentration is the key to doing so. Fortitude is the shield that maintains our efforts.

“Everything is false, only Nianfo and Pure Land is real.”

- Master Hai Xian

“The key to success is to cultivate one Dharma-door unceasingly.”

- Venerable Master Chin Kung

Venerable Hai Xian Epitaph (Written by Venerable Master Chin Kung)

賢公和尚，佛門榜樣。不事經懺，遠離利養。嚴持戒律，四眾欽仰。老實念佛，道在平常。淨土大經，諸佛祕藏。一句彌陀，甚深妙禪。百一十二，老當益壯。唯僧讚僧，法門興旺。弘普賢願，表法離障。續佛慧命，功德無量。自在往生，倒駕慈航。

Venerable Sage and model of virtue, you are a beacon of light in the darkness. Despite hardships, you were never even once tempted by pomp and profit. Strictly adhering to the precepts, you are a model for both monks and laymen. With faith and sincerity, you recited the Buddha's name. Principles of the Way were reflected in your every move. The Dharma door of Pure Land is the Buddha's highest wisdom. With the name of Amitabha, you found your Buddha-nature and dwelled in the highest Samadhi. Even as your age rose above one hundred, your strength only increased. With mutual praise, Buddhism will prosper. You have cultivated the vows of Samantabhadra and showed us the way pass karmic obstacles. You have extended the lifespan of the Buddha's wisdom, reaped boundless merits and serenely achieved rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. You have fulfilled your Mahayana vows.

This article is my updated and edited version of my original piece of Master Hai Xian in my 2015 translation of the Infinite Life Sutra:

<https://archive.org/details/edition2>